

Fake Plastic Girl

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*To my grandmothers,
Ellie and Doreen*

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I'm an angel compared to some of my friends.

—Lindsay Lohan

Growing up I was always prone to obsession, partly because of the way I am, but partly because after feeling so lonely for such a long time, when I found someone or something that I liked, I felt helplessly drawn to it.

—Lana Del Rey

CHAPTER 1

THE BODY IN THE CANAL

*E*va-Kate Kelly.

Is this story really about a person with three first names? Could anything be more tedious than a person with three first names? I know you, I can imagine you rolling your eyes thinking you're too good for a girl with three first names, let alone an entire story about a girl with three first names, but the truth is most likely that no matter who you are and no matter how hard you're capable of rolling your eyes, Eva-Kate Kelly would love that you think you're too good for her and her three first names, she would revel in the few short moments it took her to prove you wrong, she would chew you up and she would spit you out, she would impale you with the fire-green lasers that were her eyes, stare into you and then

through you, so that you'd wonder if you ever existed at all. It would take you months to recover and you'd never really be the same again. That was the Eva-Kate I first came to know, anyway.

* * *

They found her body floating in the canal. Nothing would ever be the same after that. I mean, how could it be, right? One day she's alive and thriving and the next she's purple and spongy, lying facedown in mossy water. Gone. The headlines ran like ticker tape:

HOLLYWOOD STARLET
DROWNS IN VENICE CANAL

SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD STAR OF
"JENNIE AND JENNY" FOUND DEAD

EVA-KATE KELLY STABBED TO DEATH

THE DEATH OF EVA-KATE KELLY—A GAME
TAKEN TOO FAR OR MURDER IN COLD BLOOD?

The last one I hated most. What happened to Eva-Kate wasn't a game taken too far and it wasn't murder. It was something else entirely.

CHAPTER 2

DANGEROUS, DEVIOUS, DEVIANT

*I*n eighth grade, Ms. Norris told me I had a gift as a writer. She wasn't the first person to say so, actually. In fifth grade, Beachwood Elementary published a short story I'd written about one half of a best friend necklace lost at the beach—"The Sand Locket"—in their monthly paper. In second grade, I won first place at the district poetry contest. My poem was a set of couplets expressing concern that one day technology could become so advanced we'd no longer have a reason to leave our homes. It was sappy, clichéd, and naive in a charmless way, but as far as the judges were concerned, it was the best four rhyming lines a seven-year-old had ever written.

So Ms. Norris wasn't the first person to appreciate my writing, but she was the first person to suggest one day

it could make me famous. The suggestion was vague and probably part of some contract teachers sign agreeing to encourage X number of kids per year to aim for the moon/dream as if they'll live forever and all that, but I latched onto it. All I had to do, she said, was find the right story to tell.

Never in a million years did I expect to have such a story walk into my life and all but beg to be written down. And never in a million years did I believe I'd have an audience all but beg to hear my side of things. Yet, here we are.

A lot of what you've heard out there about what happened that summer is fake news. They tell you that I was a girl obsessed, that I was dangerous, devious, deviant. They tell you about the psychiatric hospital like it was an asylum for the criminally insane, about the knife and the blood and my fingerprints. All of it to sell magazines, none of it true. I have to at least try to set the record straight.

CHAPTER 3

FEARLESS

The story starts with Chasen's.

Chasen's, as you may know, was a Beverly Hills restaurant for Hollywood's elite. But as you almost *certainly* know, it was also the title of a 2009 rom com about some fictional events leading to the restaurant's nonfictional closing back in 1995. The movie starred Rachel Ames, who was, at the time, the highest-paid actress in Hollywood. Incidentally, she was also my mom's patient.

As a therapist, my mom—Nancy Childs, PhD—was strict about never revealing the identities of her patients, and it's really not her fault that I found out. Or that I'm telling you about it now. But I was eight and it was a Saturday and we had just gotten in line at Ben & Jerry's when she received an emergency patient call. Rachel

Ames was in crisis and needed her on set ASAP. It's not like my mom was going to leave me alone in Ben & Jerry's, so what choice did she really have?

That's how I ended up on the set of *Chasen's*, eight years old and dressed head to toe in glittery snowflakes—sans ice cream—from Gap's winter catalog.

“Dr. Childs, Jesus Christ.” Rachel Ames was trembling as we approached her standing outside a silver Star Waggon, her own name scrawled on the door in Sharpie. She wore a gold-beaded shawl over her bony arms and Tom Ford sunglasses so big they eclipsed her entire eye sockets, even the top part of her dramatically angular cheekbones. Tough but friendly-looking men stood five feet from her on both sides, arms crossed, pretending to be more machine than human.

“What happened, Rachel?” my mom asked sweetly, calm as a light breeze with her seashell-pink cardigan buttoned up all the way. Suddenly overtaken by a spell of shyness, I hid behind her linen pencil skirt and pinched nervously at the fabric.

“Benji's cheating on me,” Rachel Ames said, her upper lip quivering. “He's been cheating on me. This whole time.” That was Benji Laramore, her A-list actor husband of three years. Rumor had it their agents had originally set them up on a date as a publicity stunt, but surprisingly to all involved, it ended up being love at first sight.

“Well, okay now.” My mom remained unruffled, not even vaguely fazed. “What makes you think—”

“No, no.” Rachel laughed bitterly. “You don’t understand. This isn’t a theory. This is fact. And how do I find out?” She held up a tattered copy of *Us Weekly* and shoved the cover page into my mom’s face. I craned my neck and peered upward to read the headline: “Benji Laramore Leaves Rachel Ames for Dominique Le Bon.” Beneath it, a paparazzi shot of Benji and Dominique laughing gleefully on a park bench in Paris.

Dominique Le Bon. Third- or fourth-highest-paid actress in Hollywood that year, but arguably the single most beautiful woman in the world. While Rachel Ames was pretty, an American golden girl—the good girl, no doubt—Dominique Le Bon’s beauty was extraterrestrial. Smoky cat eyes and luscious lips perpetually pouting in seductive discontent, a stomach so flat and breasts so round it would hardly be surprising to learn she wasn’t even human at all. And yet, she maintained that she’d never had any work done. And rumor had it she was telling the truth.

“Oh dear.” My mom took the magazine from Rachel’s hands and studied the cover.

“That’s right,” Rachel breathed, incredulous. “Not just cheating, but in love. Divorcing me. And of course *she* gave *Us Weekly* the whole story, *he’d* never have the balls. I thought he’d at least have the balls to tell *me* himself,

but I guess I was wrong. Either he doesn't have the balls or he plain old doesn't have respect for me." A tear slid down beneath one Tom Ford lens and she dabbed at it with her shawl, then looked at me and froze, as if only just then realizing I was there.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Childs, I didn't mean to say *balls* in front of your daughter."

"It's not a problem, Rachel. This is a uniquely painful situation."

"Can she wait out here while we go talk inside?" She gestured to the trailer door. "I'm gonna say a lot more ugly words and I don't want her to hear me talk like that."

"Don't worry." My mom patted her bulky leather handbag. "I have an iPod and noise-canceling headphones. She won't hear a thing."

"Actually, I'd prefer it if she stayed out here anyway. I need a cigarette and I absolutely can't have her seeing me smoke. She'd tell all her friends, and I really don't want kids thinking of me like this. I'm supposed to be this strong female role model and look at me! This is humiliating."

I thought it was a strange thing for her to say, that she didn't want me to see her smoke, because now I knew she smoked and would probably tell my friends anyway. I definitely would, I decided, because she'd hurt my feelings assuming that I couldn't keep a secret.

"Hey, no." My mom rested her arm lightly on Rachel's

arm. “You don’t have to explain yourself. Justine will stay right here.” She reached into her bag and handed me the iPod and noise-canceling headphones, saying, “This won’t take long, sweetie. And we’ll go back to Ben & Jerry’s right after. I owe you an ice cream, okay?”

Then I was standing alone holding an iPod in one hand and noise-canceling headphones in the other, not sure what to do next because nothing on the iPod was half as interesting as what I knew was going on behind that trailer door. I sat down on the steps and tried to hear what they were saying, but every word was muffled and garbled by the aluminum walls between us. Cigarette smoke wafted out through the mesh-screen windows.

I don’t think I would have particularly cared about what it looked like inside a movie star’s trailer if it weren’t for me not being allowed in one. I hated being on the outside, like I hadn’t earned my way in, like maybe I never would. On my mom’s 2002 iPod I listened to *Fearless* by Taylor Swift, the entire album, and with my eyes closed I could hear just how fearless this girl really was. She poured her awkward teenage heart into each lyric and didn’t care what people thought of it, or, even more fearlessly, she *did* care but wrote it down and sang it out anyway. I admired the hell out of that. In fifth grade, when I was asked to read “The Sand Locket” out loud for my class, I refused. Just the idea of standing up in front of thirty other students made my legs shake so wildly I

knew I wouldn't make it to the podium, let alone manage to force my mouth open once I got up there. But back at home that night, I'd cried—no, sobbed—because I'd *wanted* to read my story. I just couldn't. I wasn't fearless. And I worried that I never would be.

As the album played through, I thought about how in 2007 she'd played her first song (and first hit), "Tim McGraw," in front of Tim McGraw himself at the Country Music Awards. She'd strolled right up to where he sat in the audience and serenaded him on live TV, not a hint of insecurity on her ceramic face, not even the slightest tremor in her voice. Even at seventeen she knew with every inch of herself that she deserved to be there; she knew she'd earned her way in. I thought, if she were me right now, she'd knock down the trailer door and declare injustice on the whole thing, or she'd run away and make them rue the day they locked her out. But I did neither. I wasn't fearless.

It was two hours later before my mom finally came out, pulling the door closed quickly behind her, smelling strongly of smoke and perfume. The sun was down and I was shivering, the title track playing for the tenth or eleventh time, Taylor singing: *You take my hand and drag me headfirst, fearless.*

"More Taylor Swift?" My mom wrinkled her nose, snatching the iPod from my hand. "Of all the real music I have on there, you choose *Taylor Swift*?"

Yes, I wanted to say, and what do you know about real music? You think because she's new and maybe a little naive and a seventeen-year-old hopeless romantic that her music isn't real? Did you know she writes it all herself? Did you know she doesn't care whether you think her music is real or not? Did you know if I could I'd be her right now instead of me and tell you that I'm cold and tired and hungry and that you hurt my feelings leaving me out here for so long and that you owe me an ice cream?

But instead I said, "Yes. She's fearless."

"Great," my mom said. "Now I've heard everything."

I sat quietly in the back seat as she drove us home, and as we passed Ben & Jerry's I said nothing, my nose pressed up against the car window, practically lusting after the pink neon ice cream cone glowing in the dark. I wanted the ice cream, yes, but there was something I wanted more now: to get on the inside, and to be fearless when I got there.

CHAPTER 4

FAME AND ANONYMITY

Jump to the last day of tenth grade, probably one of the most important days of my life. I was sixteen and still nursing a bruised ego about the night spent outside Rachel Ames's trailer. Though I tried not to, I still believed that I'd been left out in the cold because I wasn't important. If I'd been an important person, Rachel Ames would have wanted me in there with her. She would have placed a cigarette in my tiny eight-year-old hand and said, "Okay, Justine, tell me what *you* think." Do you see what my mind can do to itself sometimes?

And it wasn't just Rachel Ames and it wasn't just my mom. Growing up in Los Angeles with two parents who rubbed elbows with celebrities—Mom adored it, Dad resented it—put me in an odd *Twilight Zone*-style limbo

between two different worlds: the world of fame and the world of anonymity. Normally, if you're rich and famous, you don't ever have to stand in the rain waiting for the bus with a drenched gaggle of teenagers and local schizophrenics who have wandered up Pico Boulevard from the beach, and normally, if you are not rich and famous, you don't get to stand with your nose pressed up against the glass box in which these enigmatic creatures live. Unless you're me. I was a non-famous, an anonymous, with front-row seats to the most in-demand show of the century, and never to be allowed onstage. It was fucking surreal.

You want examples? No problem. Here's a list, in no particular order, of ten times I was a Hollywood outsider on the Hollywood inside.

1. I'm nine years old, taking after-school classes at Brentwood Art Academy. My dad has paid the academy in paintings, not money. Suri Cruise is in my class. She's four years old but dressed to kill in her multi-patterned sundresses and oversized satin hair bows. I'm jealous of her for everything she is and has, my friends at school are jealous of me just because I know her. I hate being jealous of a four-year-old. Katie and Tom pick her up at the end of each day

in Tom's Bugatti Veyron. My mom wants to know how short he looks in person. I don't know, I say, he's taller than me.

2. I'm twelve years old and losing friends because I'm the only one developing breasts. My mom meets Joni Mitchell at a party and the two hit it off, end up deep in conversation back at her Bel Air mansion. That year Joni Mitchell calls to wish me a happy birthday and invites me to her next show. News of this makes me highly popular for about a week, before the other kids realize they don't really know who Joni Mitchell even is, and then forget entirely.

3. I'm six years old and obsessed with Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. Our next-door neighbor is their makeup artist and she agrees to take me to a photo shoot. The shoot is supposed to be set in London, but actually takes place on a set in LA that looks like London. Mary-Kate and Ashley introduce themselves as Mary-Kate and Ashley. They're sweet and friendly as angels. They smell like daisies and mint and I'm too shy to say anything. They're very busy,

but if I want I can stay and watch them get their makeup done. So I do.

4. I'm ten years old and Rachel Bilson's cousin starts going to my mom for therapy. Rachel Bilson's cousin has a bunch of Rachel Bilson's clothes that Rachel Bilson doesn't want anymore. She's a size zero in everything, and at ten years old, so am I. For the next two years I wear designer label outfits rejected by Rachel Bilson.
5. I'm eight years old and Arnold Schwarzenegger's son is on my softball team. He's at all the games. I'm the only one who doesn't give a fuck.
6. I'm eleven years old and Julia Roberts moves into a house down the street. She hires me to water her garden and pays me fifty dollars every time. Emma Roberts watches me from the porch. One day she gives me her Dolce & Gabbana headband. I treasure it forever.
7. I'm thirteen years old and my mom is working with someone on the cast of *Mad Men*,

though she won't tell me who. She gets us invited to the screening of the finale at the Ace Hotel downtown. At the rooftop after-party, she gets lost in a conversation with John Slattery. I wander away and sit alone by the Jacuzzi with the *Mad Men* logo projected onto the water. A man who says he's a producer sits next to me and holds out a drink. He says it's called an old-fashioned and puts his hand on my thigh. Immediately, I hate him for it. I stand up abruptly, accidentally knocking the drink out of his hand and into the Jacuzzi. He's mad, quietly calls me a cunt. I hurry away and hide in the hallway, crying. Jon Hamm finds me there and takes pity, helps me find my mom.

8. I'm seven years old and my babysitter is also Willow Smith's babysitter. We're invited to a Labor Day BBQ with the Smiths. I don't remember being there, but you can bet my mom saved the pictures.
9. I'm fourteen years old and a friend of a friend is dating Reese Witherspoon's daughter. We're at the mall and Reese picks

us up in her Range Rover. I have her drop me off down the block so nobody will see the tiny house I live in.

10. I'm fifteen years old and it's summer and I get a job at a ritzy horse-riding camp in Malibu where Taylor Swift keeps a horse. Everything is "Taylor this" and "Taylor that." She's all they can talk about. It drives me crazy.

Get the idea? Great.

Okay, so, back to the last day of tenth grade.

Sorry to skip ahead so abruptly like that; I know I'm not the most graceful of storytellers. Of course I'd like to write this novel as seamlessly as the greats are able to, jumping elegantly across time periods and tenses, making elaborate choices of style and structure, holding the plot tightly by its reins. But this is the first book I've ever written, and so I will by no means have the plot by its reins. This plot won't even have reins. It will have seams, and you will see them.

But anyway, it was the last day of tenth grade and we were sitting on The Hill—Maddie, Abbie, Riley, and me—eating lunch. We weren't actually eating lunch (we ate lunch after school at Cafe 50's), but it was lunch break and everyone was dispersed across campus in

their designated lunch-eating territories. The Hill was ours. It was prime real estate—we got to look down on the Hot Topic Punks who sat on the brick steps and the school-spirited popular kids who gathered around blue picnic benches in the science quad—but the real estate was worth nothing in my mind, because if we were actually cool we'd be “eating lunch” off campus, where the non-school-spirited popular kids went. The kids with parents laid-back enough to sign off-campus permission slips, and the kids deviously capable enough to forge their parents' signatures. My parents would have signed the slip, but what good would it do me if all my friends were stuck on the wrong side of the fence? The sad thing is, in their minds they weren't stuck; they wanted to stay on campus during lunch. Or so they said. Stockholm syndrome, IMHO.

“Should we leave?” I asked the group, tiredly gazing at the front gate, which was currently unguarded by the normal glorified janitors who stood there like medieval goblins and barked at anyone trying to leave without an off-campus pass.

“We can't,” Riley said, clearly confused by my suggestion. “We have two more classes left.” Riley I'd known since fifth grade. We saw everything eye to eye, once upon a time. She was a redhead with unruly freckles and what people like to call a “free spirit.” Out of the two of our spirits, hers had always been the freer one, anyone

would have told you that. But as tenth grade came to a close I felt that despite its freedom, her spirit lacked imagination. Her idea of an adventure was taking the bus east on Wilshire to an all-hours café that permitted indoor smoking, playing board games with strangers until four in the morning.

“Yeah, but how much could we possibly miss? I mean, *really*. It’s literally the last day, you know they’re just gonna put on some Civil War documentary and call it a lesson.”

“My fifth period is marine biology,” said Abbie. “Mr. Cameron isn’t going to be putting on any Civil War documentary.” Of everyone in our group, Abbie was my least favorite. She was the kind of girl who denied getting her eyebrows shaped despite their obvious, unnatural perfection, the kind of girl who loved Taylor Swift but pretended not to.

“Okay, even better,” I tried. “He’ll probably put on, like, what? *Finding Nemo*?”

Riley giggled.

“If you’re caught ditching class it goes on your permanent record,” Maddie reminded us. “Colleges can see it.” She took a chewed-up piece of Winterfresh gum from her mouth, stuck it into a silver wrapper, and rolled it into a tight ball. Then, with French-tipped nails, she unwrapped two new sticks. She was a chain gum-chewer, she didn’t go anywhere without at least two packs of Winterfresh.

And she always chewed two sticks at a time; if she ended a pack with only one stick left, she'd save it in her wallet for when she had a second piece to go with it. I wondered if the wet, smacking sound was as loud in her head as it was to the rest of us.

“What college do you think is going to possibly care that in tenth grade you skipped the second half of the last day of school?” I asked.

“Harvard will,” said Maddie. “They have over thirty thousand straight-A students competing to get in, they look at every tiny detail to weed people out.”

“Oh please.” Abbie rolled her eyes. “You’ve been unqualified for Harvard since you failed Intro to Art History.”

“You wish.” Maddie threw her wrapped piece of chewed Winterfresh at Abbie. “Then I’d have to stay here and go to whatever bullshit state school you’ll end up at.”

“I’m not going to a state school,” Abbie pouted. She tended to be able to dish it out but never take it. “I got a 1330 on my PSATs.”

“Right, well, see, I got a 1495.” Maddie chewed triumphantly.

“Stop!” I was so bored I wanted to literally crawl out of my skin. “Do we really have to be worrying about college right now? It’s summer. And we won’t be applying to schools for like two years.”

“Actually,” Maddie began, “it’s really more like one ye—”

“Fuck college,” Riley interrupted.

“Here we go.” Abbie took out a compact mirror, as if looking at her reflection would block out whatever Riley had to say.

“It’s a scam,” Riley went on. “You pay a hundred grand to some stuffy institution just so you can put it on a résumé in hope of getting hired to work somewhere corporate from nine to five until you die? And if you don’t have the hundred grand—and really, who does?—then you have to borrow it and end up being in debt to the government for literally the rest of your life. So, no thanks.” She threw her hands up in surrender. “Not me.”

“So you got a better plan, genius?” Maddie asked.

“Please don’t encourage her like that,” Abbie pleaded. “If I have to hear her tell it one more time I’ll shoot myself.”

“Tell what?” I asked.

“Her plan for after high school,” Abbie told us.

“I’ve never heard it,” I said, a little hurt. Though not too hurt, because I’d never told Riley my plans either. I didn’t think she could handle them.

“Me either,” said Maddie, seemingly pleased with the discomfort she was causing.

“I’m gonna move to upstate New York,” Riley said proudly, “and wait tables at a diner.”

“That’s . . . *that’s* it?” asked Maddie. “You want to be a waitress? You can do that *here*, you know, you don’t have to be in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yeah, but I want to be in the middle of nowhere,” Riley said wistfully. “I want to walk barefoot through tall grasses and marry a local musician and have ten babies.”

“I don’t understand.” Maddie furrowed her brow. She was stumped.

“It’s just her way of making herself feel like she’s different than everyone else,” Abbie explained. “She wants you to think she’s above your capitalist desires and conformist ideals.” As if she were above Riley’s trying to be above everyone else.

“Sure, you could see it like that.” Riley shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter to me. All I care about is that I’ll be the one enjoying life while y’all are commuting to a job you hate.” She turned to me then. “Justine, you get it, don’t you?”

I hated when she said *y’all* like she was some kind of Southern belle, when really she’d never been outside Los Angeles. And I hated that to her the entire world was laid out in black and white.

“I get it,” I said, mostly because between the two of them my loyalty stood with Riley. “Everyone has their own path. If that’s what you want to do, you should do it.”

The truth was I thought Riley’s vision for the future sounded just as flat and dry as the future all our parents wanted us to have with the undergraduate degree and the six-figure income and the stability. To me, Riley’s vision was just another version of dreaming small.

“Hey.” We looked up to see Michael Cross standing

over us with Autumn Mercer and Christa Rooney. They were juniors, a year older than we were, and represented the elite of the non-school-spirited popular kids. In other words, they were gorgeous and well-dressed in high-end vintage clothing and acted like they absolutely did not give a fuck what you or anyone else thought of them. They were only talking to us because I had fourth-period California Literature with Michael, and was the one sophomore in the class. Maddie and Abbie gawked; Riley pretended to get a text.

“Oh, hey,” I said, squinting into the sun, not sure if I should stand to greet them. “What’s up?”

“We’re just heading down to the bowling alley. I saw you sitting here so I thought I’d come see if you wanted to join us for some milkshakes and chill.”

Michael had brownish-red hair and uniquely blessed bone structure. Girls swooned over him and anxiously fretted over the question of his sexual orientation. But I didn’t care about any of that, I just thought he was so cool with his Doc Martens and pinstriped jeans and clear-framed glasses. He readjusted the strap of his messenger bag and waited for my answer.

“Like, *all of us*?” Maddie blurted.

“No, thanks.” Riley looked up from her phone long enough to intervene. “We have plans.”

“Oh . . . okay, then.” Michael looked almost disappointed. Autumn and Christa looked like they couldn’t possibly have cared less. “Have a good summer, Justine.”

“Yeah . . . you too,” I stammered as he waved goodbye.
“I . . . I’ll see you in September.”

“So, what”—Riley looked back down at her phone—
“are you in love with him all of a sudden?”

“What the fuck was that, Riley?” I glared at her.

“Come on, JuJu, you didn’t actually want to go hang
with them, did you?”

“You *know* I did.”

“Oh well,” she sighed. “I’d say I’m sorry, but it’s just
for your own good.”

“My own *good*? What the hell do you—you don’t get
to decide what’s—no, you know what? Forget it.” I stood
up just as the bell rang and brushed the twigs off my
jeans.

“Justine, where are you going?” Abbie called out after
me, but I didn’t really have an answer for her, so I just
kept walking.

* * *

I threw my backpack over the fence behind the English
building and climbed after it. Then I was free.

Looking over my shoulder every few feet, I power
walked down Pico Boulevard to the corner of Fourth
Street, paranoid that a gate guard might see me. I stood
on the corner, nervously waiting for the light to change,
thrilling fear in the form of a hot shiver racing up my
spine, certain that any second someone would sneak up

from behind and catch me in the act of trying to have a life, God forbid.

“Finally,” I exhaled as the light changed. “Thank God.”

I was partially surprised at myself for making it this far, for getting away with it. Once I got to the other side, the nerves melted away and I stood up straight, confident with the knowledge that I was officially in the clear. I took a deep breath and forced myself to keep walking until I got to the bowling alley.

Hey, guys, just thought I'd take you up on that milkshake and chill. Was that what I'd say? I mulled it over; I moved my mouth silently along the words. No, I decided, don't try so hard.

'Sup? No, too relaxed.

Hey, Michael, thanks for the invite, sorry about Riley, she doesn't know what she's talking about. Too bitchy.

Hey, y'all, how are the milkshakes? Too Riley-y.

Hey, losers, move over. Too edgy.

You know, some say my milkshake brings all the boys to the bowling alley. No way.

What's crackin', fam squad? Too stoned.

“Get over yourself, Justine,” I said under my breath. “Just go inside, don't be an idiot.”

I walked through the automatic doors and into the glow-in-the-dark-splattered bowling alley, “Any Way You Want It” by Journey raging at full volume. *Okay, so, I*

asked myself, glancing around in the dark, *if you were a pack of too-cool-for-school juniors, where would you be?* To my right, a neon sign read BOWLING DINER. FRIES, BURGERS, MILKSHAKES. Beneath the sign was a door with a small window. Far too self-conscious to just stroll on in, I stood on my toes and peered through the glass.

Indeed, there they were, Michael and Autumn and Christa. I had found them. But they weren't just drinking milkshakes and they weren't just chilling. Michael and Autumn sat next to each other in the brown vinyl booth, locked in a passionate kiss, her legs lying over his lap, his hand making its way under her shirt.

OhmyGod. I turned away as fast as I could and darted back out into the blinding sunlight. How could they do that in public? I wondered. And with Christa staring right at them? They'd looked like they were trying to eat each other alive, like somebody should have intervened.

Well, I naively thought, I guess that ends the mystery of his sexual orientation.

I didn't know why, but as I stood there with my heart pounding and the new summer sun beating down on my back, I felt let down, even betrayed. I knew I shouldn't—he liked girls, this was good news for all of us!—but something about what I'd seen left me unpleasantly mystified, even alienated, like a kid accidentally walking in on their parents during sex. A familiar weight descended on my

chest, the weight of frustration I felt whenever I sensed that I was being shut out of something desirable. Sex, like celebrity, was a world I got to look in on, but was ultimately excluded from. That's how I'd become fixated, that's how I'd become addicted to the dream.

CHAPTER 5

FEMME FATALE

I took the bus home and when I got there, my mom had just finished up with a patient in her office, which once was a guesthouse, in our backyard. She came into the house holding a leather-bound notebook and sighed deeply when she saw me. She looked skinnier than usual in a beige linen pantsuit with her dyed off-blond hair in a short, Hillary Clinton–style cut, exposing the dramatic line of her collarbones. I looked around the living room and noticed how much had gone missing since earlier that morning. The coffee table was gone; so were the bookshelf and my dad’s CD collection spread out across three towers. His liquor cabinet was now half-empty.

“Are you supposed to be home yet?” she said nervously, checking her wristwatch. “Is everything okay?”

“They let us out early,” I said. “It was the last day of school. Is everything okay with *you*?”

“Oh, right. That’s right. Honey, we have to talk,” she said, taking a seat on the living room couch.

I knew what this was about; I’d been expecting it for at least five years.

I find this next part of the story to be extremely boring, the only unremarkable piece of the puzzle, so forgive me for rushing through it. Believe me when I say it’s for the best, and that you’re honestly not missing out on anything.

“You’re getting a divorce,” I said calmly, standing across from her, holding on to the straps of my turquoise JanSport backpack. “That’s it, right?”

“Well, yes,” she stuttered. “How’d you know that?”

“Call it intuition.” I shrugged, trying to think of something else so I didn’t have to think about the millions of ways my life was going to be different from now on. Maybe it didn’t have to be different, I thought, or maybe it could be different in all the right ways.

“Do you want to talk about it? I know this can be—”

“I’m fine. But thank you,” I interrupted, shutting the door on the conversation and then the literal one to my room, before the awkwardness had a chance to grow and fester into real emotion.

It turns out my dad had already started moving his stuff into a town house in the Valley, where he’d be living

with a woman I'd never met or heard of before. And my mom already had a monthlong vacation all planned out, an abbreviated *Eat Pray Love*, something she swore she'd been dying to do way before Elizabeth Gilbert made it popular.

They arranged for me to stay with Aunt Jillian, my mom's sister, who lived with a golden retriever named Kellen in Westwood. Her condo was on the nineteenth floor of one of those towering high-rises on Wilshire and decorated with a disordered display of antiques that she picked up weekly from the Fairfax flea market. The glass cat figurines and collection of rusted, dusty scales from the early 1990s were my favorites.

I liked Aunt Jillian, I really did—her excessive emerald eye shadow, her big pearl earrings, her veneers—but I'd kill myself before spending an entire month with her. So when I found her bottles of Percocet hidden underneath a floor tile in the bathroom, we made a deal: I wouldn't tell my mom about her pill problem and she wouldn't tell my mom I was staying by myself in our empty waterfront house until further notice.

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That was easy enough, I thought on my first night alone, climbing into bed with my clothes still on. *By the time my mom gets home, by the time school starts again, the Justine everyone knew will be dead.* I vowed then to spin

myself into the sophisticated femme fatale I'd longed to be, to spend the summer collecting experiences like poker chips in a towering stack, to become so worldly and self-assured that when school started in the fall, nobody would recognize me. If only I knew where to begin.

CHAPTER 6

LARGER THAN LIFE

The first time I saw her in person she was nothing more than a paper cutout of a girl, a silhouette, still nameless, with slender arms and ripened hips, hair so long and thick it poured like milk over her bony shoulders.

It was one week after my parents had left me, and I was sitting on the porch swing with Princess Leia, our two-year-old labradoodle, on my lap. I had an open tube of raw cookie dough sitting next to me and my 2010 MacBook Pro open on the outdoor coffee table so I could click through I Know What You Did Last Night. For those of you who don't know, IKWYDLN was an online photo gallery of LA's most exclusive parties featuring mostly celebrities (A-list through D-list) and hipster models and

anonymous underage girls getting wasted in decadent settings, often with cigarettes dangling from their lips and always tons of flash. Don't bother looking it up, though; the site got taken down after everything that happened.

But in the website's heyday, photographs were organized by night, and each night got a title, word combinations I never understood like "Nylon Let's Go" or "Spooky Youth Twelve." I'd realize later those combinations were intentionally nonsensical so it would appear esoteric, vaguely poetic, a code you'd certainly be able to decipher if only you weren't so out of touch, so out of tune. The truth is, I realize now, those word combinations didn't mean anything at all, not to Spencer Sawyer (famed photographer and curator of the site) or to anyone. The whole thing was designed to make you feel like you'd never be cool enough to "get it." You'd click on one and be taken to a page of about fifty photos that would guide you in time from the beginning of the party when everyone is in makeup and heels, to the very end when the makeup is smudged and the heels are off and the cups are empty and the sun is rising outside and people are sitting on the floor and the crowd is disappearing à la *And Then There Were None*. Normally by the very end it'd be down to four people: Olivia Law (model), London Miller (model), Josie Bishop (beautiful hanger-on), and lightly freckled, moony-skinned, seventeen-year-old Eva-Kate Kelly.

Eva-Kate stood out among the others, mostly because she was so much more famous than they were. She was a child star turned party girl, one of the most gossiped-about actresses in Hollywood. She wasn't quite A-list, but almost. What I mean is that her work wasn't Oscar material, but America cherished her for what she gave them: easily digestible coming-of-age adventure features for the whole family.

Since 2007, when she'd appeared on the scene in *Jennie and Jenny*, it was clear that Eva-Kate Kelly was a prodigy. She was, at least in my mind, way too good for the club-kid scene she now dallied in, and I wondered why she chose to slum it with a motley crew of forgettable socialites. They'd be sprawled out on divans and daybeds with red eyes and blue tongues from sucking on lollipops all night and they'd look like hell, washed out and used up, and I knew I shouldn't want to be one of them but I did, because they were the main characters of this glittering train wreck, the center of Eva-Kate's world.

That night I was scrolling through the newest collection, titled "Sentiment Central." The party was inside what looked like a Swiss chalet filled up with white and silver balloons that bobbed around like detached heads. Many of the girls had bare arms and pastel lips and acrylic nails sharpened to a point like cat claws. The guys had overly styled goatees and baseball hats on

backward and leather jackets revealing inky murals on their forearms. There was a photo of a girl with clear-rimmed glasses, tongue sticking out. There was a photo of that guy from *Breaking Bad*, the younger one, getting up close and personal with the camera, looking fake-confrontational. There was a photo of a Disney Channel actress with a champagne flute, holding it up like a trophy, a heavy, silvery chain bisecting the girl diagonally at her cleavage. Olivia, London, and Josie were there. Of course they were there, lazily leaning on one another, hair in faces, clinking glasses, blowing kisses. There was a photo of Olivia sitting on London's shoulders while Josie exhaled loose rings of smoke, hip cocked to the side, sapphire eyes fiercely glowing in the dark. There was a photo of London trying to put her hair in pigtails while flipping off the camera with one hand. There was a photo of Eva-Kate Kelly sharing a stick of purple rock candy with A-list singer-songwriter Rob Donovan, his hair perfectly pushed back in what was so obviously a tribute to James Dean it was almost more awkward than sexy. Almost.

About twenty-five photos in, the party moved outside to a pool surrounded by wet slate and wooden lounge chairs. Josie was the first to strip down to her Cosabella lace underwear and jump in. Others followed, and a game of chicken began. How many rounds of Marco Polo were played, I wondered, how many underwater tea parties? I

clicked quickly through until the images began to take on motion and come to life like a flip-book: Olivia and London sat on the pool edge dipping their feet in the water, splashing it at each other, smoking cigarettes and staring off to the city sprawled out below.

Princess Leia barked—an endearingly ambitious bark—snapping me out of the fantasy and back onto my own porch with the dark canal water and the choring crickets. My scene was a lonely one. Were it to be photographed, it would convey no motion and let off no heat, do you know what I mean? It would be cold and still like a block of ice. It would be silent. Which is not how a photograph of a sixteen-year-old should be. A photograph of a sixteen-year-old should burst with sound and warmth, energy and radiation drifting off the glossy sheet like the aftershocks of her adventures. I had no adventures. I went to a high school party once with Riley and Abbie but didn't know how to ask or answer the simplest questions and spent the night standing in a corner with half a flask of Jack Daniel's someone had handed me—too cautious to even taste it—watching girls in jean shorts rub their asses up against oblivious and undeserving dickheads. I carried around the feeling that something was definitely wrong with me, I just didn't know what. I'd never had sex. I couldn't even imagine it.

Yes, that's right: Despite what you've heard, when the summer of 2018 began, I was a virgin. The image they've

fabricated of some kind of cold, calculating harlot is just that: a fabrication. And it couldn't be further from the truth.

Princess Leia barked again, her nose pointed and twitching at the house across the canal, a modern almost-mansion with tall windows, a smooth concrete exterior, and two fat palm trees sitting on either side. For as long as I could remember the house had been vacant; we'd easily been able to peer in and see how thoroughly un-lived-in it was inside, how empty. But then, suddenly one night, that night, it wasn't. Someone was in there.

"What?" I purred back at her. "What is it, my precious baby? Who's out there?" I looked out into the hedges that separated us from the still strip of water. "Who are you trying to protect us from, huh?"

That's when I saw her, my new neighbor. She walked across her living room, switching off lamps and lighting candles in their place. She opened a bottle of something and drank from it, then turned on the TV, which sprang to life in patches of fuzzy, rippled blue that filled up the room like water. It was almost as big as her wall, the TV was. Then there was me, watching from across the canal with the cookie dough I would soon be excavating for its chocolate chips, and Princess Leia, eyeing me suspiciously with each bite.

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The second time I saw her was seventeen hours later and in broad daylight. Princess Leia and I walked past the newly inhabited monstrosity-across-the-way for the third time that day when a girl came out to open her mailbox. She pulled open the tinny door and peered in, pouted, then slammed it shut. She turned toward me then and for a moment I was stunned: She wasn't just any new neighbor, she was Eva-Kate Kelly.

Yes, *the* Eva-Kate Kelly.

When people meet celebrities, they always say, "She was even more beautiful in person!" And yeah, Eva-Kate was more beautiful in person, but what struck me was how her face was so much more complex than on screen. It was somehow both narrow and full at the same time; her bones were delicate bird bones but her cheeks were two peaches sprayed with light freckles, and her eyes the glowing ends of optical fibers. When she saw me, she cocked her head to one side, the way Princess Leia would, and gave me a half smile with her orangey-red lips.

"Are you my new neighbor?" she asked. Her voice was deep for a girl's, but soft and airy. The words she spoke had space between them; they were loose and easy, caught in a breeze. My chest caved in on me. She took my breath away, she really did. I guess I have to admit that up front, otherwise there's no real point to writing all of this down for you (or for me?), no real point to getting the truth down on paper once and for all if I'm not being

rigorously honest, right? Truth is multidimensional, that's one thing I've learned through all of this, and it spins like a planet thrown wildly out of orbit, making it hard to pin down. But I'm trying.

"I live over there," is what I finally said, "in that house," and pointed behind me, to the bungalow that sat perched in the massive shade cast by Eva-Kate's mansion.

"Lovely." She ran one index finger over the black velvet line of a choker around her pale neck. "I haven't met any neighbors yet, I only moved in yesterday so I haven't gotten to explore. I'm Eva-Kate, by the way."

She put out her hand for me to shake. It was icy cold.

"Yeah . . . I know," I said, then immediately regretted it. I'd made myself sound like a fangirl right off the bat, an outsider. But either she didn't notice or she didn't care.

"And you are?"

"I'm Justine."

"Justine . . . ?"

"Oh. Childs. Justine Childs."

"Well, Justine Childs"—she squeezed my hand—"I better get back to unpacking. It was nice to meet you, hope I'll be seeing you around."

She made a gun shape with her fingers and shot me with it.

I walked home trying to process what had just happened, trying to understand the somehow larger-than-life

energy that emanated from her. She was one of those seemingly invincible people: I could imagine her driving drunk down Mulholland and emerging gracefully, more powerful than ever, sticking the landing like a skilled gymnast. And now she was my neighbor.